



# POETRY

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Review: The Gift to Be Simple

Author(s): Dick Allen

Review by: Dick Allen

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## COMMENT

## THE GIFT TO BE SIMPLE

*The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir*, by Richard Hugo. W. W. Norton.  
\$6.95.

*The Country of Marriage*, by Wendell Berry. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.  
\$4.95.

*From Snow and Rock, from Chaos*, by Hayden Carruth. New Directions.  
\$5.95.

*Impossible Buildings*, by Judith Johnson Sherwin. Doubleday. \$5.95.

*Moly and My Sad Captains*, by Thom Gunn. Farrar, Straus & Giroux.  
\$7.50.

In a time of ouster and crisis, of things steadily becoming shabbier, of shockwaves arriving so regularly that many have already forgotten what it felt like to stand on steady ground—in such a time perhaps the critic may be forgiven if he sometimes reads poets more for messages than themes, more for suggestions on how the individual might best lead a good contemporary life than for examples of successful and graceful form. The best of our poets must matter deeply to us; it would be unnatural not to hope for advice and instructions from them.

There is a long sadness going through many of the poems in these books under review, a feeling of living at the end of a civilization cycle; Yeats' great beast has begun to slouch his way toward Bethlehem. From reading three of these poets—Richard Hugo, Wendell Berry, and Hayden Carruth—there comes a pervasive sense that it is the poets who are realizing they are the last to “see” Nature in a relatively undisturbed state. If the message they are giving us is not one which tells us to retreat into a working relationship with the land and with homespun places, places soon to be no more, it is certainly akin to it. Although the world of Wordsworth's famous sonnet is constantly with these poets, it has become a world forsaken rather than forgotten. The kinds of withdrawal much of this poetry speaks of seem sadly needed. One just can't “cope” out there anymore. One must find and then hold to things which keep relatively still, which change but slowly. Hugo, Berry and Carruth take us less on a journey into the self than a journey into a still accessible real land and real life out of which one builds barriers to hold off the terror of the future. The lives these poets speak of living are not ravishingly noble, only necessary. In order to speak well and wisely in a time of crisis, one must—they seem to be saying—behave wisely by adopting some of the few sane ways of living still available.

It is the sense of the man which compels our admiration for Richard Hugo's poetry. Reading *The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir* we are forever at the side of the poet: having fun, fishing, driving through Montana, constantly participating in the life about which he writes. Hugo illuminates the almost lost places in America and in our own lives. He loves "places", real places with real names; and he dearly loves his friends—to whom many of these poems are dedicated.

The book is a four-section tour. In the first section, "Montana With Friends", we join Hugo in *The Milltown Union Bar*, look at the place *Where Jennie Used to Swim*, or visit abandoned *Coloma*:

News thirty years ago remains mold-welded  
to the walls. A lady, known to Butte police  
as Al, has been arrested with a stolen truck  
of beer in Boulder. Something about Hitler  
faded where the rain leaked in. Housewives  
faded from hard work and harder worry,  
the baby sick, the gold slow coming  
and the price of gold sung wrong  
by men returning early drunk from town.

On to Silver Star, population 17:

When you leave here, leave in a flashy car  
and wave goodbye. You are a stranger  
every day. Let the engines and the farm  
equipment die, and know that rivers  
end and never end, lose and never lose  
their famous names. . . .

Hugo tours Europe. We become happy, along with him, as he is *Walking Praed Street* and thinking of the weather briefly or oddly. When he sees *The Gold Man on the Beckler*, Hugo writes:

If I could live like him, my skin stained gold  
from this gold stream, I'd change my name.  
I have to find a trout or something bright  
but hidden by refraction, heavier than sin.

One of the best poems in the book is in the third section, "Touring With Friends". Listen to what is being done and seen in selected lines from *Montgomery Hollow*:

Birds here should have names so hard to say  
you name them over.

. . .

People die in cities. Unless it's war  
you never see the bodies.

. . .

Wives  
scream two days running and the pain is gone.  
Here, you find them living.

. . .

You own the death of every bird you name.  
To live good, keep your life and the scene.  
Cow, brook, hay: these are names of coins.

Hugo goes to Shark Island, leans back "under a sky / wide as spread  
arms." He and his companion feel they "might fake wisdom: / we have  
lived here long and understand / the urge to nothing, to a life inside."  
But,

Monks get odd,  
and without fans, hermits rage in caves.  
Better to head for a loud port  
where homes are loaded and the mail arrives.

Hugo is drinking with Indians in *A Night at the Napi in Browning*:  
"Whatever story, I hear between the lines / the novel no one wants. . . ."  
He becomes one with the friends he has made; he feels through them:  
"It never ends, this brutal way we crack / our lives across our backs. . . ."

And I, a Mercury outside, a credit card,  
a job, a faded face—what should I do?  
Go off shaggy to the mountains,  
a spot remote enough to stay unloved  
and die in flowers, stinking like a bear?

What does one do when one understands? Move on? But the places to  
which we, with Hugo, move, are always the places we have previously  
been.

In my favorite poem of the book, *Missoula Softball Tournament*, Hugo  
watches the wives watch their husbands play the game:

Under lights, the moths  
are momentary stars, and wives, the beautiful wives  
in the stands now take the interest they once feigned,  
oh, long ago, their marriage just begun, years  
of helping husbands feel important just begun,  
the scrimping, the anger brought home evenings

from degrading jobs. This poem goes out to them.  
Is steal-of-home the touching of the heart?

The game is over: "Good game. Good game. / Dust rotates in their headlight beams. / The wives, the beautiful wives are with their men."

Another grand poem is *Dixon*, where Hugo again identifies with those who have led lost lives: "On bad days in the bar / you drink until you are mayor." *Dixon* is the place where "your wife left decades back / when the train still ran." But there are good days in any life: "festive cars streak by. / You laugh and wave . . . Cattails flash alive the way they did / when lightning told them, die." And there are advantages to living in places like *Dixon*, or *Hot Springs*: "easy pace of day, slow circle of sun." Still, towns die: "Isn't this defeat / so accurate, the church bell simply seems / a pure announcement: ring and no one comes?" Yet, always in Hugo, there is the splendor of the moment, the image captured, the loveliness which can be found anywhere. Even in gray Philipsburg "the girl who serves you food / is slender and her red hair lights the wall."

Richard Hugo, in *The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir*, is our guide to regions only pinpoints on our maps. He has created a work like *Wisconsin Death Trip* without the unrelenting despair of that thesis. By showing us forgotten places and forgotten lives, by being able to identify so deeply, Hugo brings us close to totalities of existence not appearing on our TV sets. His poems of place give us perspectives, force or lead us into finding perspectives. Dying, being lost, being sad, vanished from the current events of society, is not something new to humans. Anywhere, the sorrow is watercolored with moments of joy. If we, too, are lost, we are not alone. What is important is to keep the mind and senses alive, to be able to judge, to share, as Hugo does.

*The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir* is dense in its technique, perhaps over-specific in its personal allusions, and sometimes forces meaning onto a subject not able to be so weighted. There is a sameness of technique: the observation, the getting into a feeling of a place, a main image growing stronger, an implicit or explicit judgment, balance and understanding reached. But one accepts and grows comfortable with the method. The collection is an exceptional one.

Wendell Berry's new poems are contained in a small and beautifully printed book titled *The Country of Marriage*. Berry, like Hugo, is in love with place, with the American land. But while Hugo goes touring, Berry walks farmlands and hills and looks upon the rivers of Kentucky. The poems are of Nature, of man's relationship to Nature, of a steady love for marriage, tradition, mankind. These are poems which are endangered by sentimentality, but escape into wisdom. When Wendell Berry (or his persona, The Mad Farmer) speaks, gives advice, the language is steady, quiet, like his rivers and land. The world, for Berry,

is changed by the falling of a branch from an Elm tree: "That is a life I know the country by. / Mine is a life I know the country by." Standing on the land is "a mighty blessing we cannot bear for long."

In the land, "in the country of marriage", Berry finds, "Like the water / of a deep stream, love is always too much. . . . In its abundance it survives our thirst." There is joy always waiting:

Trying to sleep, I cannot  
take my mind away.  
The bright day

shines in my head  
like a coin  
on the bed of a stream.

We are to celebrate our lives. *The Wild Geese* fly and "what we need is here." After a country funeral, Berry observes:

What we owe the future  
is not a new start, for we can only begin  
with what has happened. We owe the future  
the past, the long knowledge  
that is the potency of time to come.

*The Strangers* appear in Berry's homeland and they call, "Where are we? Where / does this road go?" and Berry thinks:

They have followed the ways  
by which the country is forgot.  
For them, places have changed  
into their names, and vanished.

He does not know how to help them:

Have I found them  
in a country they have lost?  
Are they lost in a country  
I have found?

Berry acknowledges his debt to Yeats, in a poem dedicated to him. He finds in Yeats a similar love for the soil, observing,

Our kind vandalize the earth,  
And yet you give me hope. . . .

Poet, you were but keeping faith  
With your native truth and place.

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More hope: celebrating *An Anniversary*, Berry writes, “. . . Nothing is lost. / What yields, though in despair, / Opens and rises in the night.”

It is the Mad Farmer poems I like best. *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front* shows us the statement-making Berry at his most instructive:

So friends, every day do something  
that won't compute. Love the Lord.  
Love the World. Work for nothing.  
Take all that you have and be poor.  
Love someone who does not deserve it.  
Denounce the government and embrace  
the flag. Hope to live in that free  
republic for which it stands.  
Give your approval to all you cannot  
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man  
has not encountered he has not destroyed.  
Ask the questions that have no answers.  
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.

. . .

Expect the end of the world. Laugh.

. . .

Ask yourself: Will this satisfy  
a woman satisfied to bear a child?  
Will this disturb the sleep  
of a woman near to giving birth?

. . .

Be like the fox  
who makes more tracks than necessary,  
some in the wrong direction.  
Practice resurrection.

I have on the wall of my office lines from the preface to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, in the famous “This is what You Must Do” scroll. Berry's lines touch me equally. It is the ability to make statements out of a life that—via the poetry—we feel is being truly and firmly lived, that we might value. This farmer is, of course, not mad at all. He can see, in *The Mad Farmer Manifesto: The First Amendment* that “the vision keeps / lighting in my mind, a window / on the horizon of the dark.”

The world  
is a holy vision, had we clarity

to see it—a clarity that men  
depend on men to make.

Wendell Berry, by this and his earlier poems (especially those in *Farming: A Handbook*), stakes his claim to being our primary contemporary poet of clarity. In a curious way, *The Country of Marriage* is similar to A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. It is a book one wants to carry with him, a wise book, in which one man, at least, convinces us that out of the overwhelming one may still, risking sentimentality, wrest great and good simplicities. I think of the Shaker song: "Tis a gift to be simple."

Place is again important in Hayden Carruth's *From Snow and Rock, from Chaos*—a collection of his short poems written between 1965 and 1972. And simplicity is important, too, for Carruth works here in plain language, trying to reduce things to their essences. I didn't like the book when I first read it, thinking that the simplicity was too "willed" and the sense of self-congratulation in a number of the poems something which would put off readers. Yet during second and third readings, Carruth caught me. What he is trying for is something more ambitious than Berry; he sacrifices ease, but in his best poems Carruth manages to stay "simple" while not shutting out the "chaos" to which the book's title refers. Almost all these poems are terribly serious, finished, using the minimum of words. *I Could Take*, for instance, is a perfect little poem about love, jagged imperfections matching. *Fear and Anger in the Mindless Universe* shows us a Vermonter, Evan, who is part of an auto accident. The man in the other car "bled to death in ten minutes." The confrontation at first, when Evan feels shocked about not dying himself, seems to Evan strangely funny. Now, when the story is told, Evan

tells it without smiling  
quicklike  
looking out the corner of his eye.

Carruth expresses feelings of sadness, loneliness, separation, throughout the book. He is the poet with the little-recognized profession of so many of us: "myself, who holds in translucent hands / everyone's lost light." He senses the lives of others, exploring them in beautiful phrases. The poem *If It Were Not For You* ends, "How gravely and sweetly the poor touch in the dark." In *The Ravine*, Carruth looks and looks and then sees his own way of looking:

These are what I see here every day,  
not things but relationships of things,  
quick changes and slow. These are my sorrow,  
for unlike my bright admonitory friends  
I see relationships, I do not see things.



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These, such as they are, every day, every  
unique day, the first in time and the last,  
are my thoughts, the sequences of my mind.  
I wonder what they mean. Every day,  
day after day, I wonder what they mean.

In *Once More*, Carruth is still self-concerned:

. . . My heart in my ribs does what it  
has done occasionally all my life: thumps and  
heaves suddenly in irregular rhythm that makes  
me gasp. How many times has this season turned  
and gone down? How many! . . .

Carruth is over and over obsessed with things, feelings, caught just  
before their passing. In *The End Again* he exclaims, "But how / Immense  
this high tension / System is!" He knows "It will go. Flare, stink / Of  
burnt metal, and lights / Out. Then all will freeze." The tapes will be  
"heaped in a tangle, unplayable." In the lovely poem, *This Decoration*,  
a crow comes suddenly,

as if from a great  
distance, from eternity  
*Caw, caw*, loudly. And back  
from beyond the firs comes  
the answer, *caw*, way off, far  
although near too, and wordless,  
as real things always are.

The sense of ever-present mystery is in *Almost April*:

Stars falling, stars  
in multitude, the universe  
drifting down—  
lights without sound or almost  
without sound.

And no end to it.

Carruth moves through a cold landscape, seeing, smiling, thinking,  
and ends the poem by again contemplating his own Being:

Weary, God!  
of starfall and snowfall,

weary of north winter, and weary  
of myself like this, so cold and thoughtful.

Like Hugo and Berry, Carruth finds forsaken places. In *Abandoned Ranch, Big Ben*, “the lizard blinks / With eyes whetted for extinction.” As visitors come “from snow and rock, from chaos” they are present when “there is a presence emerging here.” The “displaced Yankee ghosts” wail:

This ranch is abandoned to terror and sublime.  
The man turns to the woman and child. He has never  
Said what he meant. They give him  
The steady cool mercy of their unrepentant eyes.

The poem in this collection which perhaps shows Carruth at his finest is *The Cows at Night*. Here there is a perfect marriage of simple nature imagery and quiet mood. Stopping beside a field, the poet sees “the cows. Always a shock / to remember them there, those / great breathings close in the dark.” He walks out into the pasture to count them. They are “sad and beautiful / like girls very long ago / who were innocent and sad. . . .” The poet does not know what he must do, go or stay,

for how  
in that great darkness could I explain  
anything, anything at all.  
I stood by the fence. And then  
  
Very gently it began to rain.

That last line, pristine, is the clear sigh, the acceptance which in other poems Hayden Carruth so longs for, comes so close upon. The natural order of things may yet reassert itself, by itself. Let us, however, leave Carruth with this view. The poet is talking to his son in the poem *Too Tenuous*. They see “sandhill cranes near Ruby Lake, Nevada”, as

Chinese brushstrokes among tan reeds—  
the composed and oriental splendor  
of this world. Bo, my son,  
you grow as this grows rarer.  
We know what the cranes are facing. Already  
I am a collector  
of such precious fragments and you will become  
perhaps a connoisseur, driven in love and wonder  
to pendency. Turn away, dear Bo.

Love will not keep in such a dwindled order  
too tenuous to know.

Judith Johnson Sherwin's second collection of poetry, following *Uranium Poems*—which received the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize—is a drastic contrast to the books reviewed above. In *Impossible Buildings*, Sherwin mainly demonstrates her fine facility with music. The sound effects achieved in these poems make one after another a *tour de force* of rhyming and meter. The poems are of invention and artifice and that they are is of course signaled by Ms. Sherwin's choice of M. Escher's work to provide her volume's title and cover picture.

Unfortunately, this 143-page book contains a vast majority of poems which are merely clever exercises; the facileness soon bores and then alienates the reader. Ms. Sherwin plays around and plays around, almost always on the defensive. Her use of a central image in the book, the brain, shows how she is completely conscious of the effect her methods may have: "let the words outrun / my running brain." In *The Pact: Three Songs*, she says, "i think you mean / to suck my mind out then / crush me, drop my shell." In *Holy Sonnet*: "Look at me, I am dying of terminal / Conjunctivitis, the itch for connections, too much rouge in the eye." In *A Reading Glass*, she says, "i'll grant you the argument, admit / i take the wit and not / the thought." She can be snide, as when she titles a poem *Mouth Like a Cactus (a folktale, how charming)*, and utterly pleased with herself, as in the last lines from *For My Friend Who Hates Me*:

i with my polished  
voice. i with my rank  
smell, i with my obdurate  
balance outside the act

and she can admit, in *Part of a Letter*,

forgive me for fucking around  
forgive me for getting abstract again  
argument  
is my meat  
i wasn't ever cut out  
for an earth mother. . . .

But should the critic "forgive"? Sherwin's poems are words, words, words, staircases so often going nowhere, like the drawings of M. Escher, truly *Impossible Buildings*. Yet the technique does not survive the transference from one art form to the other. What we may resent is the way these poems promise deeper emotion, commitment, and then offer us glittering trinkets when we have sought deep concern. True, I have

taken lines out of context, but Sherwin brings this sort of criticism on herself, she expects it, building into her poems constant defenses. To say in effect "I know I'm too witty, but my knowing and admitting it makes it ok" does not really make it ok.

To be fair, there are some strong poems in the book. Sherwin must be aware of herself at her best, since she has placed two of the best first and last. The first, *Vinegar to Drink*, has an exceptional beginning stanza:

Look, now they come, the channering rains come down,  
 The years, the rains, with worrying tongue and tone;  
 Water rubs steel to rust and rain rots bone,  
 Rots hands, rots brows worn down their long frown.  
 Living and dead, flesh melts and teeth stain brown,  
 The firm brain turns, like butter on warm stone,  
 Runny and brown again, and down they drone;  
 The churning, channering rains still chisel down.

And here is section two from *Nova*, the brilliant declamatory poem with which the volume concludes:

i hear the voice i love loud in every speaker, crackling with static,  
 the big bang  
 of choice in us crosses my streets, crosses, crosses my mind, signs  
 my mind of streets,  
 crosses my voice, my voice of streets, hoarse, turns against me, turns  
 it against me news / news  
                   my voice       /       is no longer mine.  
 bright star, nova, no longer mine, blazing into cannibal life,  
 nova, nova, news i bring in my loud cars, my friends crackle and  
 flame in my liquid streets,  
 my mind's heavens, my fields of light, incendiaries of themselves,  
 they sizzle out: *they / they*  
*they* have betrayed us, *they* have ignited us, *they* have made us  
 rockets / live bombs.  
 what constellation remembers there is no *they*  
 what universe, what nebula where no mind sparks knows now  
 how *they* have burned out, they lie fallen in ashes, in grey rain,  
                   in pits where once dead / medalled suns  
 in a spasm of energy sucked whole galaxies into themselves  
 compacted, impacted, a universe stamped  
                   down / to one dense coin.  
  
 it will not be any better when we sleep  
 it will not be any better when we sleep

This is Judith Johnson Sherwin being topflight. Should she continue to gather this strength, and take more time to *feel* her way, rather than so

often be content to be the chessplayer only concerned with patterns of strategy, this overly-long, tedious book should in the future be judged only as a self-indulgent pause in the career of a poet whose remarkable talent might become a triumph of more than "the Republic of Intellect."

Thom Gunn's new volume is really two books. Since *My Sad Captains* (1961) has already been richly and deservedly praised, my attention goes to the more recent poems, contained within *Moly*.

What, then, to say of Thom Gunn, the Englishman transplanted to America? His "popular" reputation, in this country especially, rests upon his heavily anthologized poems dealing with motorcyclists. Yet the motorcycle poems are not really characteristic of the Gunn who has so carefully crafted *Moly*. Here, we find a poet of great technique, a master of rhyming and poetic pace, showing us one totally finished poem after another. And, unlike Sherwin, the emotion and meaning are never subjected to flashy effects. *Moly* is a volume which must be read terribly slowly, as we make ourselves open to Gunn's painstaking welding of language and message.

The poems, many showing that the sources of their inspiration came from experiences with LSD, seem to have been hard won, brought *back* from an incredible distance and set down, letter by letter, on the page. They are like weights holding us down from being blown or scattered into a universe of incredible beauty, where all is connected, where man is merged with beast, or Nature, or light, or boundary. Listen to the first two stanzas of the masterful poem, *Sunlight*:

Some things, by their affinity light's token,  
Are more than shown: steel glistens from a track;  
Small glinting scoops, after a wave has broken,  
Dimple the water in its draining back;

Water, glass, metal, match light in their rapture,  
Flashing their many answers to the one.  
What captures light belongs to what it captures:  
The whole side of a world facing the sun.

Further in the poem, the sun is the

Great seedbed, yellow center of the flower,  
Flower on its own, without a root or stem,  
Giving all color and all shape their power,  
Still re-creating in defining them.

Gunn finally asks of the sun:

Enable us, altering like you, to enter  
Your passionless love, impartial but intense,

And kindle in acceptance round your center,  
Petals of light lost in your innocence.

Gunn often sees us as men trapped in inhuman bodies, as the wild boars (once men) in Circe's sties. There is an escape, a possible vision, symbolized by the *Moly*: "I push my big grey wet snout through the green, / Dreaming the flower I have never seen."

From *The Rooftop* the poet looks out at sunlight, "the year's last flower", and thinks:

Perception gave me this:  
A whole world, bit by bit.  
Yet I cannot grasp it—  
Bits, not an edifice.

A color machine is, like the human, "in a state of unending alternation." Is it acid which does it all? In the jovial *Street Song* the peddler sings,

My methedrine, my double-sun,  
Will give you two lives in your one,  
Five days of power before you crash.  
At which time use these lumps of hash  
—They burn so sweet, they smoke so smooth,  
They make you sharper while they soothe.

One of the perfect, epitomizing poems in this book is *The Messenger*. In a work of brilliant stillness, a man observes a flower:

Is this man turning angel as he stares  
At one red flower whose name he does not know,  
The velvet face, the black-tipped hairs?

...

His stillness answers like a looking glass  
The flower's, it is repose of unblown flame  
That nests within the glow of glass.

*Being Born* is another "fantastic" poem in which Gunn shows "man and boundary blended" as he slips into memory and the spaces of time. And *Three*, in which a nude child at a nudist beach is shown to accept everything, truly is one with his body, while his parents "sit / At watch, who had to learn their nakedness" is another Gunn poem experiencing natural beauty.

The poetry in *Moly* does not at all excite, and is not intended to do so. What it does is that which is so much more difficult, so indicative of the work of a mature poet: it *satisfies* deeply. Gunn will not win a larger

audience with these new poems, but he continues to confirm the expectations of his already appreciative one. A suggestion, though: to understand most readily what Gunn is doing in *Moly*, the reader who lacks experience with LSD should read *Remember Be Here Now*, by Richard Alpert, a major part of which is most easily found as "The Transformation: Dr. Richard Alpert, Ph.D., into Baba Ram Dass" in *The Inward Journey* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973).

Gunn's work presents a strong argument against the overt message-carrying possibility of contemporary poetry. The poems, compared with the work freighted the messages I so admire in Hugo, Berry and Caruth, do not seem immediately to matter. But as Gunn shows us a possibility of seeing into ourselves, into the beauty and majesty of the Self, he too seems to answer the outer world by another type of withdrawal—not one into place, but into Being. Strangely, Judith Johnson Sherwin's poetry also, looked at as a whole, expresses "retreat" into song, into the delight with wit. These withdrawals, these pervasive pullings back, are, as I have tried to indicate, ways toward answers or meaningful existences sought and found by contemporary individuals. The examples set by Robert Frost, and the kinds of ideas and feelings his poetry communicates, are much more influential today than many of us would have expected some years ago: the Frost "sense" persists in Montana, Kentucky, and modern Vermont.

And yet . . . the poet bathed in sunlight, as he cultivates his own garden, as he dances in his own field, as he reaches out to his immediate friends and shuns the metallic and mauling and multitudinous society where things fall apart—is he all that we need, or is he only what we can have?

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